



# SOL LEWITT *a retrospective*

December 7, 2000–February 25, 2001

WHITNEY

# SOL LEWITT a retrospective

This exhibition celebrates the art of Sol LeWitt (b. 1928) with more than 150 works drawn from four decades of the artist's productive career. LeWitt's work bridges Minimal and Conceptual art, movements that developed in the 1960s and aimed to redirect art away from the psychological content and gestural form typifying Abstract Expressionist painting of the previous decade. Beginning in the mid-1960s, Conceptualism became an internationally influential trend, encompassing work by artists with widely different theories about artmaking. What linked them was an interest in extending art beyond traditional approaches to painting and sculpture without resorting to highly personalized expression. Using photographs, language, unconventional materials, repetitive forms, and performance actions, Conceptual artists explored new ways of creating art that focused on ideas rather than on handmade objects.

LeWitt was a key figure in the growth of Conceptual art, and his structures and wall drawings remain among its lasting achievements. LeWitt's mature works use ordinary and impersonal forms to explore repetition and variations of a basic shape or line. Perhaps most important, he evolved a method for creating art based on simple directions, so that his works could be executed by others. In his seminal text from 1967 titled "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," he wrote: "When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."

LeWitt has never forsaken the fundamental approach that he developed in the 1960s, emphasizing ideas over psychological expression and letting other people bring these ideas into physical and visual form. Over the years, however, his art has grown more complex in its effect and more

complicated in its execution. The work from the 1960s is the most austere and straightforward, while that from the 1970s inventively enriches the ideas of the prior decade with more elaborate linear compositions. The early 1980s saw a marked shift to sensual color and surfaces, a wealth of geometric shapes and their permutations, and an increasingly architectural scale. In the past five years, the vitality and invention of both his wall drawings and his structures have been especially pronounced. With undulating waves and hot, bright colors, LeWitt's art has reached a heightened physical and perceptual presence.

Forming the core of this survey are LeWitt's wall drawings—works executed directly on the wall in pencil, crayon, ink washes, and, recently, acrylic paint—and "structures," the term he prefers to use for his three-dimensional works. Works on paper, including drawings, made primarily in pencil, ink, and gouache, as well as photographs and posters are also on view. The exhibition explores only a portion of LeWitt's work, since his total production to date numbers more than nine hundred wall drawings, hundreds of drawings on paper, and scores of structures, ranging in size from modest models to human-scale objects to room-sized installations and monumental, outdoor works.

## EARLY WORK

LeWitt moved to New York in 1953, at a time when Abstract Expressionism dominated the contemporary art scene. He supported himself with various jobs, first in the design department at *Seventeen* magazine, doing pasteups, mechanicals, and photostats. He then worked as a graphic designer for the young architect I.M. Pei. This contact proved formative for, as LeWitt would later write, "an architect doesn't go off with a shovel and dig his foundation and lay every brick. He's still an artist."



1. *Run I-IV*, 1962. Oil on canvas and painted wood, 63 1/2 x 63 1/2 x 3 1/2 in. (161.3 x 161.3 x 8.9 cm). LeWitt Collection; courtesy Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut  
Photograph courtesy the artist

In the late 1950s, LeWitt was painting in a gestural, Abstract Expressionist style and drawing copies after reproductions of Old Master paintings. In 1960, he took a job at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, first at the book counter and later as a night receptionist. He met other young artists working there (Dan Flavin, Robert Mangold, Robert Ryman, and Scott Burton), all of whom were searching for a new direction "that would lead away from the pervasive but useless ideas of Abstract Expressionism." For LeWitt and his colleagues, the psychologically loaded brushwork of Abstract Expressionism had become, by the early 1960s, an entrenched style that offered few creative possibilities for young artists.

LeWitt began to experiment with the flat painted surface, eventually creating work to "make color or form recede and proceed in a three-dimensional way." By 1962, he had completed a group of large, square relief paintings, such as *Run I-IV* (Fig. 1), featuring a series of small figures in sequence and, on projecting wood squares, the word "run." Such works reveal the importance of language for LeWitt and the crucial influence on him of Eadweard Muybridge, the

nineteenth-century photographer who made the first "stop-action" photographs—arranged in grids—with sequential images of horses galloping and people in motion. LeWitt, who credits Muybridge for sparking his interest in serial imagery, eventually incorporated these ideas about the sequential development of forms into his mature abstract work. By 1962–63, LeWitt was creating resolutely abstract compositions, as in *Wall Structure*, a complex sculptural relief in which concentric square forms made of wood project dramatically from the picture plane, thus creating an amalgam of painting and sculpture.

## WALL DRAWINGS

The idea of drawing directly onto a wall is, as LeWitt has pointed out, as old as prehistory, but it has also been one of his richest contributions to contemporary art. His engagement with the flatness of the image surface and conviction that art could reside in an idea led him in 1968 to make his first wall drawings. The wall drawings are based on LeWitt's written instructions and are often accompanied by a simple diagram. Some are easily rendered and can be realized by almost anyone, while others are complex and require great technical skill. Each wall drawing is unique and can only exist in one place at a time. However, LeWitt allows his wall drawings to be re-created for exhibitions on a temporary basis even



2. Fourth wall, from *Wall Drawing #289* (A six-inch [15 cm] grid covering each of the four black walls. White lines to points on the grids. 1st wall: 24 lines from center; 2nd wall: 12 lines from the midpoint of each of the sides; 3rd wall: 12 lines from each corner; 4th wall: 24 lines from the center, 12 lines from the midpoint of each of the sides, 12 lines from each corner), 1976. White crayon lines and black pencil grid on black walls, dimensions variable. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Gilman Foundation, Inc. 78.1.1-4  
Photograph by Geoffrey Clements



3. Wall Drawing #752 (*Continuous complex forms with an irregular black grid*), 1994. Color ink wash on white wall, dimensions variable. Château d'Oiron, France

if they have already been realized elsewhere. He modifies his drawings to conform to a specific site and scale, whether in a museum or a private collection. Although he originally drew some of the wall drawings himself, today he leaves their execution to a team of trained assistants. His working mode is, in this respect, much like that used in architecture or music, where the architect or composer conceives the work but does not execute it.

LeWitt's reason for developing the wall drawing was typically logical and direct: drawings were supposed to be two-dimensional and the best way to achieve maximum flatness was to eliminate the paper support and draw directly on the wall. His first wall drawings were square or rectangular in format. Executed in graphite pencil, they consisted of straight lines, often superimposed, drawn in four directions—vertical, horizontal, and two crossing

diagonals. Fairly quickly, LeWitt introduced pencils in the primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—which could be layered to create a range of hues. In the 1970s, he added chalk and crayon to his repertory of materials. As the drawings became more complex, combining lines with arcs and circles, they were increasingly able to hold larger spaces, and LeWitt began to give their architectural settings greater consideration (Fig. 2).

In the early 1980s, LeWitt introduced ink washes of primary colors and gray which, as in printing, could be layered to create an astonishing range of hues (Fig. 3). At the same time, lines were transformed into bands, and flat geometric shapes took on three-dimensional illusion. By late in the decade, the drawings had evolved into fractured, brightly colored, isometric forms that appear to dissolve the wall as a visual support.

Three years ago, LeWitt began working with acrylic paints, which gave the wall drawings a harder-looking surface and more vivid coloration. In these recent works, contained geometric forms have increasingly yielded to curved shapes and expansive, open-ended compositions such as *Loopy Doopy* (Fig. 4) and, most recently, to what LeWitt has simply called “blobs.”



4. Wall Drawing #879 (*Loopy Doopy [black and white]*), 1998. Acrylic paint on white wall, dimensions variable. PaceWildenstein, New York  
Photograph by Ellen Page Wilson; courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York

## STRUCTURES

In the mid-1960s, LeWitt made a number of free-standing objects in painted wood that explore issues of solid and void. A critical work from 1964 is *Standing Open Structure Black* (Fig. 5), in which the skin of a once-solid object has been stripped away to open the form and reveal its skeletal structure.

In 1966, LeWitt began to paint his open structures white so they were “visually more a part of a white wall.” These beautifully austere, open modular structures, derived exclusively from the cube, are LeWitt’s first and perhaps only works that can truly be called Minimalist. As with the wall drawings, he creates an interplay in his structures between simplicity and complexity: a single unit, whether a straight line or a cube, is choreographed



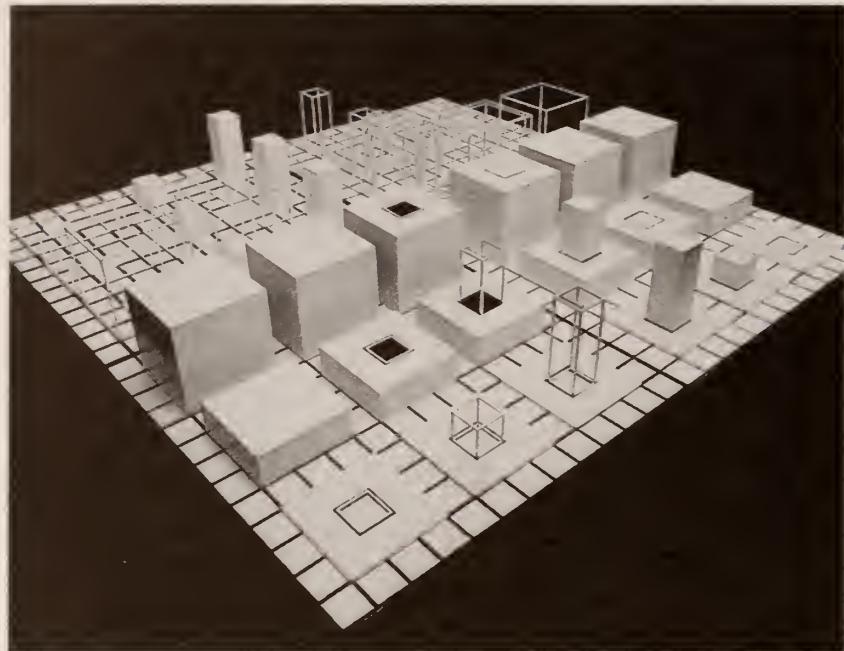
5. *Standing Open Structure Black*, 1964. Painted wood, 96 x 25 1/2 x 25 3/4 in. (243.8 x 64.8 x 65.4 cm). LeWitt Collection  
Photograph courtesy the artist

6. *11 x 11 x 1*, 1989. Baked enamel on aluminum, 148 x 25 x 25 in. (375.9 x 63.5 x 63.5 cm). Collection of Linda and Jerome H. Meyer  
Photograph courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

in ways that transcend its simple origins. The cube provided LeWitt with a basic yet endlessly variable vocabulary that has sustained his three-dimensional work for thirty-five years. He has returned to this form many times, often achieving a surprising level of complexity and elaboration. In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, the structures were refined and the modules multiplied, intensifying their complexity and optical play. These transparent, shimmering structures have taken many forms—including towers and ziggurats—calling to mind modern architecture as well as that of ancient civilizations (Fig. 6).

## SERIAL PROJECT #1 (ABCD), 1966

LeWitt has made several large, integrated works as comprehensive explorations of a single idea. *Serial Project #1 (ABCD)* (Fig. 7) marks the introduction of seriality, which LeWitt understands as “multipart pieces with regulated changes.” The work is one of the most ambitious and complex of his career and one of the earliest to signal the emergence of what would come to be called



7. *Serial Project #1 (ABCD)*, 1966. Baked enamel on aluminum, 20 x 163 x 163 in. (50.8 x 414 x 414 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Agnes Gund and purchase (by exchange)

Photograph by Jacob Burckhardt

Conceptual art. The forms and ideas of his earlier cube-based structures are here clarified and expanded into a rationalized system, based on a premise which LeWitt defined: "to place one form within another and include all major variations in two and three dimensions." The square and the cube are used as logical step-by-step elements in the development of this premise.

## INCOMPLETE OPEN CUBES, 1974

*Incomplete Open Cubes* (Fig. 8), comprising structures, drawings, and photographs, sets out each possible permutation of an incomplete open cube—a total of 122 possibilities. LeWitt worked out the forms (which were eventually verified by a mathematician) through many sketches and by bending paper clips into various configurations. Each form is expressed in three dimensions—an 8 x 8 x 8-inch wooden structure—and in two dimensions, as a drawing and a photograph. They progress from the simplest—three-sided forms in three combinations—to the complex—one eleven-sided form (twelve would complete the cube). Though elaborate in its conceptual underpinnings, *Incomplete Open Cubes* reflects the logic, accessibility, and playfulness of LeWitt's art.



8. *Incomplete Open Cubes*, 1974. Painted wood structures on a painted wooden base, framed gelatin silver prints, and drawings on paper, 12 x 120 x 216 in. (30.5 x 304.8 x 548.6 cm) overall. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Accessions Committee Fund: gift of Emily L. Carroll and Thomas Weisel, Jean and James E. Douglas, Jr., Susan and Robert Green, Evelyn Haas, Mimi and Peter Haas, Eve and Harvey Masonek, Elaine McKeon, the Modern Art Council, Phyllis and Stuart G. Moldaw, Christine and Michael Murray, Danielle and Brooks Walker, Jr., and Phyllis Wattis

Photograph by Ben Blackwell; courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

## LATE STRUCTURES

Throughout the 1980s, LeWitt's structures, like the wall drawings, became more intricate and varied. In works he has called "complex forms," faceted, irregular geometric shapes erupt from the floor like enormous crystals. He has described their genesis as an attempt "to make things that I had never imagined. I had no idea what they would look like." After laying down a grid on a sheet of paper, he assigned numbers to the intersections of the lines (as an indication of height), chose various points for dots, and then connected them. From the drawings, small-scale wood models were made. These in turn served as maquettes for full-scale structures in wood or aluminum.

Increasingly in demand for commissions, LeWitt has not only designed many wall drawings for private homes and public sites but, since 1986, has produced monumental works made of concrete blocks for outdoor sites. Drawn to this inexpensive medium for its "non-art" status, LeWitt has constructed such works in a number of international locations. In striking contrast to his light-permeated

open structures, these solid forms of stacked blocks—cubes, pyramids, walls—are enormously heavy and visually impenetrable. Despite their massive nature they, like the wall drawings, can be destroyed once they have been exhibited, remaining only as a set of instructions until their next installation.

Most recently, LeWitt has extended the sinuous forms of his late wall drawings into three-dimensional objects. These “non-geometric forms,” which he also refers to as “splotches,” incorporate amorphous, flowing shapes cast in fiberglass and painted in shiny black or startlingly brilliant hues.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY, 1980

Beginning in 1971, LeWitt spent a good deal of time working in Italy and in 1980 moved to the Central Italian town of Spoleto. Thereafter, he was seldom at his studio in New York, where he had worked for the previous twenty years. Before leaving, LeWitt documented that studio in an extended series of photographs, which he then arranged in nine-part photogridds and called *Autobiography* (Fig. 9). The result is an intimate but indirect portrait of the artist. The

photographs are straightforward, the images banal and mundane, showing the artist’s life not as a glamorous affair of publicity and myth, but as a day-to-day rhythm of ordinary activity and work. Far from a haphazard gathering of pictures, however, *Autobiography* is organized by a carefully considered structure, and the individual photographs embody all the internal logic and formal rigor that informs the rest of LeWitt’s work. The beginning section reveals the physical character and construction of the space itself and the artist’s tools and materials. Later, LeWitt is present through clothes and personal effects—books, music collections, clippings, and reproductions. Throughout, he intimates the passage of time: windows first reveal daylight; later, lights are illuminated and clocks register different hours. The pictures are a puzzle, with subtle clues, formal relationships, and sly visual jokes connecting one to another. LeWitt seems to suggest that the characteristics of life out of which art arises are particular to the individual, to a place and time, but also that the prosaic circumstances of life are universal and basic to us all.



9. *Autobiography*, 1980 (detail). Sixty gelatin silver prints mounted on paper, 12 x 22 in. (30.5 x 55.9 cm) each sheet. LeWitt Collection  
Photograph by Jacob Burckhardt; courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York

# WHITNEY

## PLAN OF THE EXHIBITION

Exhibition begins on Floor 4 in the Emily Fisher Landau Galleries

Other locations:

Floor 5, Ames Family Gallery

Floor 1, Anne & Joel Ehrenkranz Gallery

Lower Level, Robert J. Hurst Family Gallery

Sculpture Court

"Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective" is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The organizing curator is Gary Garrels, former Elise S. Haas Chief Curator and Curator of Painting and Sculpture, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and currently Chief Curator of Drawings and Curator of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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AXA FOUNDATION

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A fully illustrated catalogue is available at the Whitney Museum Store: cloth, \$75 (members price \$67.50); paper, \$39.95 (members price \$35.96).

Cover: *Fourth wall, from Wall Drawing #289, 1976 (detail)*

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## LECTURE

Gary Garrels

Wednesday, January 24 7 pm

Join Gary Garrels, organizing curator of "Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective," as he discusses the exhibition.

Admission: \$8; members, senior citizens, and students with valid ID \$6.

## COURSE

Sol LeWitt and Conceptual Art: An Insider's Look

Session A: Thursdays, February 1 and 8 6:15–7:30 pm

Session B: Fridays, February 2 and 9 11 am–12:15 pm

In this two-session course with a Whitney Museum scholar, participants explore "Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective" and examine the development and impact of Conceptual art through the exhibition "Pollock to Today: Highlights from the Permanent Collection."

Admission: \$50; members, senior citizens, and students with valid ID \$40.

Advance tickets are required for all public programs; call 1-877-WHITNEY or purchase tickets in the Museum Lobby.

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